

FULRO claims wide support among the montagnards, particularly those of the relatively sophisticated Rhade tribe. Whatever FULRO's strength, it rests on mutual suspicion between the montagnards and the Vietnamese proper—a suspicion based on ethnic difference and maintained by the French in colonial days. In this quarrel, the Americans, who won montagnard affection for their efforts to arm the "yards" against the Viet Cong, are caught in the middle. And further complicating the problem is the fact that the Viet Cong have promised to give the montagnards autonomy if they help to establish a Communist government in Saigon.

Last week, after shucking off some American agents assigned to keep him away from FULRO, NEWSWEEK's Merton Perry spent several hours with a spokesman for the organization in

ment cannot accept the unreasonable demands of FULRO. FULRO leaders will be sorry if they continue their past activities."

American officials, blamed by many South Vietnamese for "coddling" the montagnards, are nervously advising unity as the cure. The American closest to the scene is Col. Laurence S. Browne, a chunky, blue-eyed tennis player who is senior adviser to the South Vietnamese 23rd Division. Browne doesn't believe the FULRO leaders are Communist but adds: "If they ain't with us, they're against us." Accordingly, therefore, Browne favors the strong-hand policy advocated by the South Vietnamese. Beyond this, Browne wants no publicity. He has made it painfully clear that newsmen are unwelcome. An American captain at Buon Brieng sent a message to Saigon last week, asking that no

Thunder in the Mountains

Buried deep in central Vietnam's dark-green highlands is the dusty little outpost of Buon Brieng. Buon Brieng's whitewashed flagpole flies the red and yellow flag of South Vietnam and its thatched-roof longhouses are jammed with grinning, mahogany-tinted warriors who are being trained to fight the Viet Cong by the green-bereted men of the United States Special Forces. Last week, however, Buon Brieng was off limits to U.S. newsmen. The reason: a rebellion there, hushed up until recently, now threatens to spread across the highlands, sweeping up the 700,000 montagnard tribesmen who inhabit nearly half the total area of South Vietnam.

Brieng's revolt lasted just three days. No one was injured, and the camp's defense was relatively undamaged. But when the rebellious tribesmen sauntered back into the bush, after eating their fill, they took 200 rifles with them. With them, too, went 185 montagnard Special Forces trainees. And it could happen again almost anywhere in South Vietnam's thinly populated highlands. "They can take over any camp they want to without firing a shot," admits a worried American.

"They" are FULRO (the United Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Race), an organization dedicated to achieving political autonomy for the montagnards. Though it has only 2,000 members,



Montagnards: 'If they ain't with us, they're against us' Earl Young

the highlands capital of Ban Me Thuot. Cabled Perry: "The man from FULRO was a young, sturdy Rhade in tight, tan Levis and an old U.S. Army fatigue shirt. He had a confident manner, a quick smile, and his frankness was surprising. He came directly to the point: FULRO, he told me, is anti-Viet Cong. It wants to fight the Viet Cong. But it wants to fight directly at the side of the Americans. FULRO, he added, can count on the support of nearly all the Rhade, as well as other tribes."

Patience Runs Thin: Though FULRO aims at full autonomy, its leaders realize the war makes this unrealistic at present and have scaled down their demands in recent talks with the South Vietnamese government. But whatever concessions FULRO believes it has made, there are ominous signs that Saigon's patience is exhausted. Last week, Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky publicly warned the montagnards: "The govern-

ment be permitted to visit the camp. "If necessary, ground all aircraft," he begged.

But South Vietnamese and Americans alike, while professing confidence that a widespread flare-up can be avoided, are obviously worried. And the gravity of the problem is illustrated by the fact that, except for regular South Vietnamese army units, the defenses of Darlac province, the center of the Rhade tribe, depend almost entirely on montagnards. If they are alienated, or forced into the Viet Cong camp, Darlac is, quite simply, lost. And any use of violence against FULRO would almost certainly lead to a general uprising, which would accelerate the slide. If the South Vietnamese can somehow steal the montagnard revolution from the Communists, the threat will end. Otherwise, that whitewashed flagpole at Buon Brieng may soon be flying the gold-starred, blue and red flag of the Viet Cong.